



US Able Life

By making a few adjustments to management processes, this company has excelled in a down economy, according to Jim Casey.



We'll Managed

By making disciplined management processes and fact-driven decisionmaking part of its culture, Little Rock, Ark.-based US Able Life has been able to navigate what can be a complex business model.

“The primary uniqueness of our business is that we have five equity owners who are also our partners in the distribution channel,” said COO Jim Casey. “To a large extent, they are

also our customers. That is a tremendous advantage in the marketplace, but it can also be complex in its dynamics.”

The company has an alliance management model that creates relationships from the boardroom through operations through sales and marketing. According to Casey, US Able Life offers a great understanding of its Blue Cross partners and how they do business.

“We understand how they do business, and there are slight differences in how each of the Blues operate,” said Casey. “We use a standardized business model that we customize to each plan’s unique characteristics.”

Attention to management processes and decisionmaking within the company has helped it deal with business complexities. When Casey came to the organization about two years ago, he said he saw tremendous opportunities to grow with the Blue partners.

“What the organization needed at that time was a little more fact-driven decisionmaking and a little more management structure and accountability,” Casey said. “One thing we did was put in place monthly operating reviews where the management team drills through our business and gets each person talking not just about their functions, but also about the business in general. This has helped clarify where our priorities are, and from a cultural standpoint, it has worked well. We’re by no means finished with the process, but it has made decisionmaking easier.”

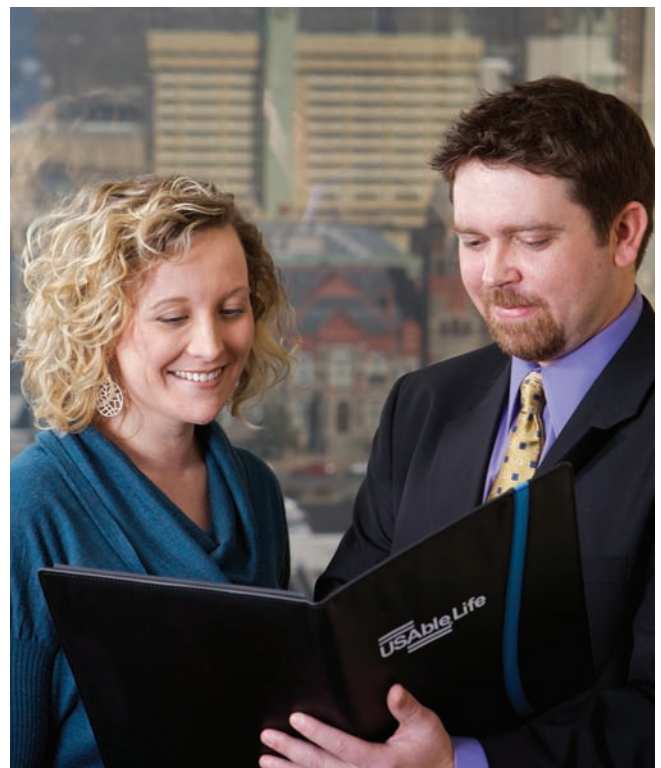
Growing during tough times

“Despite the deepest recession since the Great Depression, we’ve grown our business, and it has been a benefit for our partners, as well,” said Casey. “As the healthcare industry continues to be challenged from a regulatory standpoint, being in the ancillary lines of life, disability, and dental insurance has been an opportunity for them to grow, diversify, and generate capital.”



The company made some recent investments to take advantage of those opportunities in the marketplace. The bulk of a \$40 million strategic initiative investment was spent in the last three years on upgrading the infrastructure of the life and disability product platforms.

Some changes were also made in the distribution area and the project management offices. “We’re making some investments that we knew needed to be made to get the business to the next level and be competitive with some of the big players out there,” said Casey. “It’s starting to pay dividends.”





Keeping a close relationship with customers has also paid dividends. For example, if an employer in Florida has a question about a plan, it can call either the Blue partner or USABLE Life.

“We can get the answers to their questions,” said Casey. “We have people who know their business and how it is being handled, so we can be local and national in the same breath.”

The company has about 500 employees, many of whom have a background with Blue Cross companies. However, in the past several years, the company stretched out somewhat to



hire employees from different industries and professional backgrounds to bring in fresh perspectives.

Sticking to its strengths

The company is keeping an eye toward expanding geographically and from a product standpoint. By growing, it will be able to make investments in products and new capabilities. For example, the company is in the process of implementing a vision insurance capability.

“We’re not going to become extremely diversified and be an all things to all people kind of company,” said Casey. “We want to stay fairly close to our life, disability, dental, and similar lines of business.”

One thing changing in the industry is the customer equation. The company is primarily a group carrier where the main customer is the employer that buys insurance products for its employees. However, with more voluntary plans for consumers and more individual choices, Casey said the company has to begin having more of a business-to-consumer rather than a business-to-business focus.

Another key to success is having close working relationships with vendors. “A lot of our success comes from being able to partner with vendors and owners and getting all the proper levels of alignment,” said Casey.

As the industry changes, Casey said his company will be in a healthy position because of its outstanding people and corporate culture. “Our culture is strongly focused on the desire to serve the customer properly and getting the right thing done,” he said. “We focus on creating repeatable processes where every transaction results in an excellent customer experience.” ■

